

Abbey College Cambridge

Independent school standard inspection report

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Reporting inspector	Trevor Watts

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.^{1, 2}

Information about the school

Abbey College is a part of the 'Alpha Plus Group Ltd.' company. It occupies four separate premises in the centre of Cambridge and has been operating as a college since 1994. It received its present designation as an independent school in April 2010 and this is its first Ofsted inspection under this designation. The college provides education for students in the age range 14 to 21 years, and there are currently 230 students on roll. The great majority of students come from abroad and speak English as an additional language. Mainland China, Malaysia, Vietnam and Nigeria are the students' principal countries of origin. Through a tailored range of courses the college aims to promote the high levels of academic success that will prepare students for entry to the most prestigious British universities. It has an ethos of valuing individual students and promoting their self belief and appreciation of their community and environment.

Evaluation of the school

Abbey College provides an outstanding quality of education. It admits students with a range of prior academic skills and varying levels of competence in understanding and speaking the English language. Students are very well focused on gaining the skills and qualifications necessary to get them into their university of choice. As well as their high academic success, students build good skills in spoken and written English and develop valuable personal and social skills.

Arrangements for safeguarding students are good and the college meets all the regulatory requirements. Outstanding features, including the curriculum provided and the behaviour of students, combine to contribute to the college's overall success in developing young adults who are mature and prepared extremely well for their future lives.

Quality of education

The overall quality of education is outstanding. The curriculum is outstanding because it is so well tailored to the needs of the students. For younger students, there is a good range of eight GCSE courses which include three sciences, as well as

¹ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/ukpga_20020032_en_14#pt10-ch1-pb4-l1g162

² www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2005/ukpga_20050018_en_15#sch8

accredited non-GCSE courses in sports and personal and social education. Taken in a one-year intensive course, this is very good preparation for the sixth form.

Sixth form students are offered an excellent range of possible combinations of A and AS levels that can be taken over 18 months or two years, depending on the intensity of study required. There are effective main 'Pathways' or combinations of subjects available, oriented to sciences, mathematics or business-related subjects, for example. Students can choose these pathways or have specific arrangements if necessary. They generally study four A levels in their first year, plus English, and three in the second year, plus English. The various subjects are offered at different levels, including ones that aim only at A* success. The flexibility of options ensures that individual needs are met appropriately. The International Foundation Programme is available for students who need a specific preparation for a university place. Many students take part, and succeed, in the 'Olympiads' of national and international competitions in mathematics, sciences and technology-related areas. Some students take part in 'Full-time English' courses for intensive language development. The school has invested heavily in new technological equipment, such as interactive white boards, as part of its present initiative to increase cross-curricular use of technology.

There are summer schools for new entrants to develop their English skills and opportunities to take specialist examinations such as the bio-medical admissions test (BMAT). Success in these has contributed greatly to many students' successful applications to medically-related courses at university. There is also a thorough programme of personal, social, health and citizenship modules which are taught to all students. Students are encouraged to take part in local sports, such as tennis, football and badminton. Their learning is enriched by trips locally to museums and research centres, for instance, or to London for 'shopping and the sights'.

The quality of teaching and assessment is good. Teachers are often very well qualified and have excellent subject knowledge. They have positive relationships with their students, especially in their tutor groups. They use a wide range of resources imaginatively, although students are expected to provide their own text books for some courses. Lessons are generally planned with care and are prepared well, through the published texts for courses and excellent, very well focused course work-books produced by individual teachers. Lessons run at a good pace and teachers often ask good, open questions that challenge students' thinking skills as well as their language skills.

However, students' learning of English is not sufficiently enhanced across the curriculum: there are times when teachers make 'throw-away' comments and use colloquialisms that are not understood by all students, and are not explained. Frequently, teachers miss clear opportunities to encourage students to speak aloud in front of their classmates or to discuss problems in pairs or groups. Often, the questions are mainly aimed at a few more confident students, while others are silent, and some teachers allow their students to speak in their home language in classroom discussions.

Teachers assess the academic progress of their students very frequently. The 'stage tests' every three weeks point to possibilities of anyone falling behind, and trigger positive responses from tutors and teachers. Termly and half-termly assessments and module tests help to create and sustain the drive and motivation that students generally have. Public examinations, university entrance papers and the Olympiad competitions are the final assessments and motivations for many students.

Results are outstanding. The college's results place them in the top ten of independent colleges in England, with, for example, 32% of A level passes being at A* grade in 2010. Similarly, 70% of passes were graded either A* or A, and 93% were in the A-C range. Significant numbers of students attain Advanced Extension Awards (AEA) to improve their chances of gaining places at their chosen university. Twenty students have gained entry to Oxford or Cambridge universities in the past two years, as well as to top Schools of Economics and specialist universities for dentistry, medicine and veterinary science. Recently, students have gained places at about 40 different universities. Students make outstanding progress in their learning. The GCSE course for Year 11 students is new, but all students are already on track to attain good grades in this and all of their subjects. Sixth form students are very attentive in class and absorb knowledge extremely well. There are times when they could be more interactive in their learning, rather than being relatively passive.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Students enjoy their lessons and have a high rate of attendance, although punctuality is not always strong, and this detracts from some students' preparation for a life at university or in the workplace. They are encouraged to take responsibility for their own lifestyle and behaviour, which is outstanding, although some would like more opportunities to take on more responsibilities. Students take part in trips in the evenings and at weekends. These are rather limited because of the college's long taught day, but some students expressed a desire to have more educational and cultural visits. Many are on the school council, which is active and meets fortnightly. Others help with the Eco Award that the college is working towards. Lessons in personal, social, health and citizenship education cover a host of topics from Guy Fawkes and ASBOs, to human rights and cyber bullying. Students learn how to manage their budgets and bank accounts, and provide some of their own meals and entertainment. Many have taken part in voluntary hospital work in preparation for medically-oriented careers and they have raised funds for charities and appeals such as those related to Haiti, Darfur and the Indonesian tsunami.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Arrangements for the welfare, health and safety of students are good. All of the regulations are in place to ensure that students are properly safeguarded and there is a suitable plan that fulfils the college's duties under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001. Students' welfare is well provided for through a combination of thorough and careful

documentation, procedures that are well understood by staff and the encouragement of students to take part in external activities and visits. This is mainly coordinated through the pastoral system in which tutors safeguard, encourage and nurture groups of students. They discuss problems, organise applications to universities, encourage cycling to college and arrange information visits from outside groups such as the police and fire department. A nurse is present for part of each week and is on call at all times.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

All staff have been checked to ensure that they are suitable persons for working with young people and that their qualifications are correctly held. Staff have undertaken training in areas such as first aid and safe recruitment of new staff. All of the requirements are met and details are kept in a well-maintained single central register.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The accommodation is safe, secure, fit for purpose and is maintained to a good standard. The four separate buildings are a mixture of large former residences and new office-style buildings. All are well maintained with a range of sufficient equipment and safe access and egress. New electronic whiteboards in almost all classrooms provide teachers with many opportunities for enlivened activities that students can also carry out themselves. There are areas for recreation outdoors, as well as an extensive nearby park and a leisure centre.

Provision of information

Information is provided in many different ways, such as on the internet, in printed and electronic newsletters and in emails of individual reports. The staff handbook, student handbook, prospectus and individual curriculum and policy documents are all comprehensive and readily available. Because most students are from the Far East, and their admission is managed through a local (to their home) agency, reports are generally forwarded via the agents and translated by them. This system works very effectively; parents and other interested parties are kept very well informed at all times.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The college's complaints procedures are all in place and fully meet the requirements. There have been no formal complaints since the college opened.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The proprietor has ensured that the school meets all of The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, schedule 1 ('the Regulations').

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- Give more structured consideration to the way in which students' English language skills and confidence are developed in lessons throughout the curriculum, such as by
 - encouraging more paired discussions, organising more activities in which students address the rest of the class, taking part in role play and drama activities;
 - more careful use of language by teachers, avoiding colloquialisms, for instance, if they are not explained.

Inspection judgements

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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The quality of education

Overall quality of education	✓			
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of pupils	✓			
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of pupils' needs		✓		
How well pupils make progress in their learning	✓			

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development		✓		
The behaviour of pupils	✓			

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils		✓		
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School details

School status	Independent		
Type of school	Secondary		
Date school opened	April 2010		
Age range of pupils	14–21		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 141	Girls: 89	Total: 230
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Annual fees (day pupils)	£15,000 to £18,100		
Address of school	17 Station Road, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, CB1 2JB		
Telephone number	01223 578 280		
Email address	julian.davies@abbeycambridge.co.uk		
Headteacher	Dr Julian Davies		
Proprietor	Mr Graham Able		